



### The Idea of a University: Grey Philistines Taking over Our Universities

*By Jim McKernan*

#### Introduction

I have chosen as the title of my essay that of John Henry Cardinal Newman, the famous Oxford academician, in his famous work *The Idea of a University* (Newman, 1908) based on lectures he gave in setting up the Catholic University of Ireland in 1854; now University College Dublin. It is my thesis that we are in danger of losing our concept of education in favour of lower notions of instruction and training. Let me explain. By 'training' I mean a process which suggests the acquisition of skills and the enhancing of performance capacities. By 'instruction' I mean learning facts and new information-the results of retention. But by 'education' one understands induction into the forms and fields of knowledge: those thought processes and intellectual activities that allow one to know the epistemologies of the culture so that we can think rationally, by using it. Too often nowadays, even folks in universities confuse training and instruction with pure 'education'. We lose sight of this concept of education at our peril.

It is lamentable that intellectual activity for its own sake is being hijacked in favor of the penchant managerialism and the intrusions of technical rationality so characteristic of the business-industrial complex today. Traditional (basic) research, what may be thought of as "blue sky" inquiry in the human and social sciences, is being viewed as inappropriate in favour of applied scientific "evidence-based" research methodologies where grant money is being currently channeled. Thus the scientific and technical-rational monopoly over and dictation of behaviors, curriculum and instruction. This strategy is acknowledged as the legitimate way forward in official policy statements from the OECD and US Federal Government on the future of research in higher education. Those who have sought to find the truth through historical and other qualitative research methods are being ignored by funding agents across the Western World.

In 1993 I accepted the first Deanship of Education in Ireland at Limerick University. The technical rationalists and entrepreneurs were coming through the college windows I recall. I resigned the following year and resumed my professorial duties in America apart from that environment. I admit I expected some of this managerialism at Limerick, which had emerged from a technological base, but not the out-of-control intrusions of technical rationality resulting in a now discredited "Total Quality Management" strategy (which has been abandoned in most American universities) for the entire university and its emphasis on "entrepreneurship". I see this managerialism evident in every facet of education today in both the USA and Ireland. Yesterday I heard the Governor of North Carolina, a former teacher, Beverley Perdue; state that the first word a six year old should learn should be "entrepreneurship". It amounts to the 'training of capitalists' at base. Perdue was delighted to learn that our local Pitt Community College had received 21 million dollars

of the President's Stimulus Package to set up IT programs to educate hospital administrators digitalize medical record-keeping.

What is the aim of a university education? Let us recount what Cardinal Newman argued:

"I am asked what is the end of University Education, and of the Liberal or Philosophical Knowledge which I conceive it to impart: I answer, that what I have already said has been sufficient to show that it has a very tangible, real, and sufficient end, though the end cannot be divided from that knowledge itself. Knowledge is capable of being its own end. Such is the constitution of the human mind, that any kind of knowledge, if it be really such, is its own reward."  
(Newman, 1908: 103)

Further on in the work Newman expands his ideas:

"Now, when I say that Knowledge is, not merely a means to something beyond it, or the preliminary of certain arts into which it naturally resolves, but an end sufficient to rest in and to pursue for its own sake, surely I am uttering no paradox, for I am stating what is both intelligible in itself, and has ever been the common judgment of philosophers and the ordinary feeling of mankind. I am saying what at least the public opinion of this day ought to be slow to deny, considering how much we have heard of late years, in opposition to Religion, of entertaining, curious, and various knowledge. I am but saying what whole volumes have been written to illustrate, viz., by a selection from the records of Philosophy, Literature, and Art, in all ages and countries, of a body of examples, to show how the most unpropitious circumstances have been unable to conquer an ardent desire for the acquisition of knowledge. That further advantages accrue to us and redound to others by its possession, over and above what it is in itself, I am very far indeed from denying; but, independent of these, we are satisfying a direct need of our nature in its very acquisition; and, whereas our nature, unlike that of the inferior creation, does not at once reach its perfection, but depends, in order to it, on a number of external aids and appliances, Knowledge, as one of the principal of these, is valuable for what its very presence in us does for us after the manner of a habit, even though it be turned to no further account, nor subserve any direct end." (Newman, 1908:104)

Newman argues consistently that knowledge for its own sake is a significant purpose of a scholar in a university-moreover, this is the very essence of conduct within a liberal education:

"This process of training, by which the intellect, instead of being formed or sacrificed to some particular or accidental purpose, some specific trade or profession, or study or science, is disciplined for its own sake, for the perception of its own proper object, and for its own highest culture, is called Liberal Education; and though there is no one in whom it is carried as far as is conceivable, or whose intellect would be a pattern of what intellects should be made, yet there is scarcely any one but may gain an idea of what real training is, and at least look towards it, and make its true scope and result,

not something else, his standard of excellence; and numbers there are who may submit themselves to it, and secure it to themselves in good measure. And to set forth the right standard, and to train according to it, and to help forward all students towards it according to their various capacities, this I conceive to be the business of a University" (Newman, 1908: 153)

### The Technologization of Education

It should be pointed out that this notion of technical means-ends rationality in education began with the Americans. In particular Franklin Bobbitt, a former engineer who became Dean of the School of Education at Stanford University. Franklin Bobbitt was among the first (Bobbitt, 1918) to argue for a form of efficiency-accountability that schools should be like factories where students are viewed as products and that the physical plant should be utilized on a shift basis throughout the school year. He became so enthralled with this that he produced a book outlining some 800 behaviours all responsible citizens should be able to perform. He operationalised the use of behavioural performance objectives and the American and European systems of educational planning have never been the same since. This "Science in Education" movement led to Educational Psychologists embracing Behaviourism as an appropriate theory for curriculum design. That is, those teachers should state specific outcomes in students in terms of behavioral performances in order to be accountable that students had mastered subject knowledge. Picasso remarked that predicting outcomes makes nonsense of any activity and in essence in education it would deny the use of imagination. My mentor, Professor Lawrence Stenhouse, (Stenhouse, 1975:82) once remarked:

"Education as induction into knowledge is successful to the extent  
That it makes the behavioural outcomes of the students  
*unpredictable*"

In commenting about the loss of imagination in educational culture, Mary Warnock, the English philosopher wrote that "imagination is the faculty by means of which one is able to envisage things as they are not" (Warnock, 1973). The trend nowadays in education is to plan all the outcomes as behaviours in advance of instruction, and test student by means of objective type multiple choice tests to see if they have mastered this 'rhetoric of conclusions'. On this model students never exercise their own creative imagination or critical discourse-they select random options already printed on the test page. This is not education but mere training and instruction-teaching to the test.

College syllabuses are replete with behavioral objectives, lists of competencies, performance indicators and like concepts all in aid of increasing the FTE indexes that dictate the 'productivity' of the unit . It is all a numbers game nowadays. We must reclaim the idea that education is not about skills and reaching targets, but rather it implies, as Newman argues, a careful use of knowledge to create new meanings, interpretations and critical understanding. An educated person is a one with a cultivated intellect argued Newman (Mulcahy, 2008:3) An educated person may be considered a *constructionist*, one who is able to make independent meaning for oneself. The idea is that with education we are able to put it to use in thinking and creating. Education thus is a social practice that

enables one to illuminate aspects of their lives by using it. The idea is that knowledge and experience gained through schooling transfers outside of schooling. For John Dewey 'education' was

"That reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience" (Dewey, 1966:66)

## Conclusions

The problem is that the grey philistines who are "running" of our colleges and universities claim, falsely, to be businessmen running enterprises which will bring greater economic growth and riches through applied research-not "blue sky" inquiry. These "bottom line" people are all too often truant academics, and many never had a true liberal education. They are running universities while having no idea what universities are for. Anti-intellectualism automatically leads to the glorification of ignorance, and if these philistines are not put in check we shall be well on the way from the former to the latter.

I believe that there are very real possibilities that education can be reclaimed from these 'grey philistines and merchants of managerialism'. The idea of a university is that it is a community of scholars having a discourse, using a variety of research methods *appropriate to their discipline* to advance knowledge, to contribute to searching for truth through inquiry, to conduct teaching of this knowledge and these methods, so that students can get into perspective the knowledge which they *do not yet possess* and to offer service to the university and the community. The main thing is to permit academic freedom in the pursuit of these inquiries. Academic freedom means that lecturers and professors have an unfettered right to select materials and methods appropriate to their discipline and the right to conduct research that matches their curiosity and interests. The health of education and society is indeed tied to this notion of academic freedom-which is being eroded at present by arguments to abolish tenure. University administrators seem only interested in the "bottom line" here-saving funds through cost-cutting vital disciplinary appointments and even closing down what are regarded as 'unproductive' departments. This reorganization, albeit in the name of efficiency, seems utterly incoherent to this observer. I have watched in my lifetime whole departments of Logic, Philosophy, (subjects at the core of a liberal education from medieval times) and indeed whole Colleges, disappear due to the 'bottom line' mentality. The control by universities and other agencies of higher education over teaching, research and learning and their inalienable right to academic freedom must not be relinquished to external agencies and government. These 'grey philistines' argue that universities and colleges should not be a place of leisurely intellectual pursuits and 'blue sky' inquiry. Yet the pursuit of intellectual curiosity is what has characterized the greatest universities throughout history. As scholars we are accountable to the standards immanent in our respective disciplines first. Of course it is right that any government or foundation grant money for research demands accountability-but the idea that these agents would run the university is a sacrilege. Further the idea that the Arts disciplines would not be funded is indicative of a Philistine philosophy of education. One of the better ideas of mankind was to establish universities where truth and knowledge could be pursued for their own sake.

I would argue that it was the setting up of universities in the 11th century in Europe (first in Italy by the Pope at Salerno and Bologna) that saved world culture and literacy from extinction during the 'Dark Ages'. In this respect we owe a great debt also to our Arab friends who had perhaps the greatest institutes of higher education by the 9th and 10th centuries and who had transcribed many of the lost works of the Greeks and Roman scholars. My favorite 'Don' was, however, Peter Abelard, (1079-1142) the critical philosopher and logician, who criticized state and church and was perhaps the greatest scholar of Paris in his day and precursor to the establishment of the secular University of Paris in or around 1160 A.D. Abelard taught us that the critical thought of an independent and free scholar would be a valuable aspect of higher education. We need to respect the various methods by which scholarship is engaged and invite our students into this search. It is a search that does not discriminate between the arts and sciences. That, I believe, is the idea of a university.

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Jim McKernan is Professor, Social and Cultural Foundations of Education, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, College of Education, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina, USA. He can be reached at: [mckernanj@ecu.edu](mailto:mckernanj@ecu.edu)

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